

# INNOVATIVE MANAGEMENT IN CIRCULAR ECONOMY. CASE STUDY: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SGR BY RETURO PROJECT IN CARAȘ-SEVERIN COUNTY

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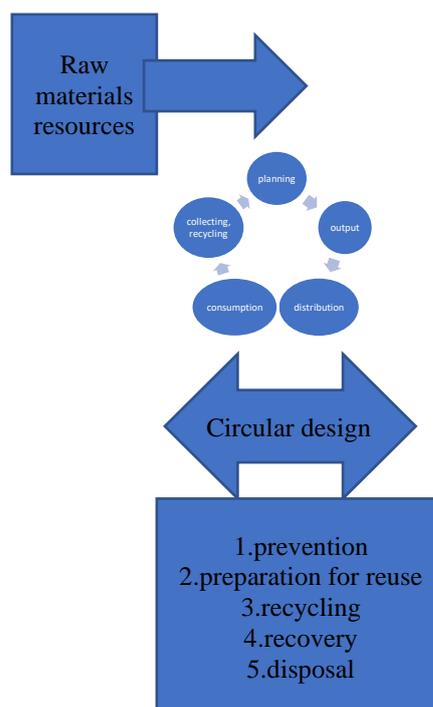
**Abstract:** In recent decades, circular economy concept has acquired increasing importance in the context where natural resources are increasingly limited and the pressure on the environment is becoming more and more obvious. This approach is based on the idea of maximizing existing resources, minimizing waste and recycling materials to create a sustainable and economically efficient system. In order to successfully implement this model, it is essential to apply innovative management meant to facilitate the transition to a circular economy. In this respect, the SGR project represents a significant opportunity to put the principles of circular economy into practice.

**Keywords:** innovative management, circular economy, guarantee-return system.

## 1. Introduction

Circular economy or green economy is created with the aim of recycling and reusing materials on two levels; a biological one that ensures the entry of materials into the biosphere without negative effects, and a technical level by which components of the materials can be used efficiently. According to the theory, circular economy is part of the green economy and both belong to sustainable development that implements the concept of reusing materials or optimizing the consumption of resources to prevent and reduce their waste [13]. In addition, circular economy involves waste management and closes the consumption of resources whenever and technically possible.

The most suggestive graphic plotting of circular economy is given on the website of the European Parliament of June 1<sup>st</sup> 2023, when the Special Report thereon was published [14]. Circular economy principles provide for a minimum reduction of the impact on the environment, therefore products and production processes must be redesigned in such a way that they prevent the waste generation. In other words, circular economy is intended to be a different model of production and consumption, meant to extend the life cycle of products by applying as much as possible to the repair, rental, renovation or recycling of materials and products, so that the 2.2 billion tons of waste produced annually by the EU will be significantly reduced, [15].



**Fig. 1.** Circular Economy, processed apud [2], page 8

This *manufacture-use-dispose* structure proposed by the EU for circular economy respects the principles of sustainable development and brings significant advantages to it, including all stages of a product's life cycle.

Also, through circular economy, *professional retraining and acquisition of skills* specific thereof for all members of society is achieved, as well as their *active collaboration*, even a promotion at the level of all non-

formal and informal forms of *education* in relation to sustainable development. There has been legislation adopted by the EU regarding the efficient use of resources since 2010 when the Commission adopted the Europe 2020 Strategy, then numerous directives have been implemented, and in February 2023 the Industrial Plan of the Green Deal came into force, in which the circular economy-related actions are meant to reach the common goal of *zero net emissions for the EU* and to become a fully circular economy by 2050 [14]. The benefits of implementing a fully circular economy in the EU are many and with a significant impact on limiting the loss of biodiversity, reducing the total annual emissions of greenhouse gases, cutting down the amount of waste from the packaging of the products purchased by each EU citizen, reorganizing product labeling or reducing the dependence on raw materials that increase the EU's trade deficit to over 35, 5 billion euros, reducing supply risks, stimulating innovation and encouraging economic growth and creating more than 700,000 new jobs by 2030, etc. [15].

Romania, in terms of circular economy, ranks last in the EU, and by 2030, according to the National Strategy on circular economy, the model of sustainable development and the transition from the linear economic model to the circular one must be implemented in economy [16]. This Strategy is implemented simultaneously with The National Waste Management Plan and in November 30, 2023, the SGR-Guarantee-Return System by RETURO project came into effect, which tries to recycle waste whose average in the EU in 2020 was 48% and in Romania below 14%, [17].

At the proposal of the Ministry of Environment, Water and Forests, Government of Romania passed GD 1074/202 regarding the establishment of the guarantee-return system (SGR) for non-reusable primary packaging which came into force with the obligation for all producers of products packed in SGR packaging from 30.11.2023, and the administration of this guarantee-return system is done by RETURO SGR SA which was appointed on 24.08.2022. As of this date, non-SGR registered products can no longer be put into circulation on the Romanian market, with the exception of products that are in stock at both manufacturers and retailers. This project has a positive debut with many prospects for improvement so that it is *improvable* according to those who administer it. [18]

## 2. Theoretical Considerations

The first definitions of "Circular Economy" appeared in the 1970s in Switzerland forwarded by Walter R. Stahel in the Cycle Thinking or Economic Performance and it was finally defined by Ellen MacArthur Foundation's as "Circular Economy" in 2010 (Ellen MacArthur Foundation A, 2021) [12]

Circular economy represents a theoretical concept which aims at creating an industrial system that is

restorative by intention; in recent times, business have become more aware about such concept, seeing it as a mechanism that can be used to create competitive advantage [3]

"Circular Economy" forwards the circulation of resources through integrated production chains. Disposal moves from waste management to a product and system design process. Thus, "Circular Economy" consists of an intentionally repairing or regenerative industrial system, which seeks to bring operational and strategic benefits, as well as an enormous potential for innovation, job creation and economic growth [12]

The concept of circular economy has recently gained and continues to gain prominence on policymakers' and researchers' agendas [1]

A circular economy has the advantage of offering innovative solutions. [10]

The literature on innovative management in circular economy offers numerous perspectives and case studies illustrating good practices and challenges encountered in the implementation of such projects. Reference authors include the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, Cara Goodman, Lei Shen, and others. Their studies highlight the importance of innovative leadership, stakeholder engagement and paradigm shifts in resource management to ensure a positive impact on the environment and society.

The transition to a "Circular Economy" brings opportunities to all sectors. According to the report "Towards circular economy, the business rationale for accelerating the transition" by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2015), these opportunities are: [12]

- economic opportunities: more significant economic growth, substantial net cost reduction, job creation and more innovation;
- environmental and systemic opportunities: reduction of emissions and consumption of primary materials, preservation and increase of land productivity and reduction of negative externalities;
- companies opportunities: sets of new and greater profits, greater security of supply and new demand for business services, with the consequent increase in resilience;
- opportunities for citizens: more usefulness as a result of expanding the range of options, lower prices and lower total property costs.

An innovative approach to project management in circular economy can be achieved by implementing the SGR (Separation, Collection and Recycling) waste management project, which aims to reduce waste and increase the degree of recycling. The implementation of the SGR project involves several stages that must be effectively coordinated and monitored to ensure success and positive impact on the environment.

An important aspect in the innovative management of the SGR project is the involvement of stakeholders in the decision-making process. According to Friedman et al. [2] the active involvement of stakeholders can help identify their needs and expectations, as well as create a

consensus on the project's objectives. The main stakeholders involved in the SGR project may include local authorities, non-governmental organizations, waste management service providers and the local community.

According to Su et al [11] another important aspect in the innovative management of the SGR project is the use of digital technologies and data analysis to optimize the processes of waste collection, separation and recycling. By implementing a data monitoring and reporting system, one can effectively track the waste flow and quickly identify problems or opportunities to improve system performance.

Geissdoerfer et al. [4] argue that innovative SGR project management can involve collaboration with external partners, such as technology providers or other organizations in the recycling industry. By collaborating with external partners, additional expertise and resources can be brought in to contribute to streamlining processes and increasing the sustainability of the project.

The implementation of the SGR project also requires an active involvement of the project team in the decision-making process. According to Kirkpatrick et al. [5] a well-coordinated and motivated team can make the difference in achieving project objectives. By involving team members in the decision-making process, creativity and innovation can be stimulated in identifying solutions for the challenges encountered in project implementation.

In order to ensure the success of the SGR project implementation, it is important that the project manager is a visionary leader and promotes a culture of innovation and sustainability within the team. According to Nidumolu et al. [6] a visionary leader can motivate the team to overcome obstacles and focus their efforts on project goals. By fostering a culture of innovation, an environment conducive to the generation of new ideas and continuous process improvement can be created.

So as to conclude, innovative management plays a crucial part in the implementation of circular economy projects, such as the SGR waste management project. Through the involvement of stakeholders, the use of digital technologies, collaboration with external partners and the active involvement of the project team, the success and sustainability of the project can be ensured. A visionary leader and a culture of innovation are key to creating an enabling environment for the implementation of circular economy projects and contributing to building a more sustainable and healthier future for the generations to come.

### 3. Research Methodology:

The SGR guarantee-return system is for Romania the largest circular economy project, and almost a year after its implementation, according to Mrs. S. Popa [8], it produced the following results:

- More than 75% of the economic agents involved (producers and distributors) were registered in the

SGR, and 45% of them have already signed the contract with RETURO;

- Significantly increased the average collection rate through SGR, for example from 0.05% in December 2023 to 40% in April 2024, according to [8];
- Similarly, the volume of packaging collected through SGR increased from 31 thousand packaging in December 2023 to 160 million packaging in April 2024, according to [8];
- Numerous merchants, approximately 20,000 from traditional and independent retail, were visited and advised by the RETURO teams, and some of them implemented automatic machines of the RVM type inside the stores or in their vicinity, according to [8];
- For at least 5000 people, this project has created the possibility of obtaining a unique income for them and their families, and it has educated and warned many consumers about recycling and reducing pollution.

The results so far are encouraging, PET being the most collected and recycled type of plastic for consumers in Romania, according to Mrs. Popa S., [9]. Also in 2022 in the EU approximately three million tons of PET type waste were collected, which represents a rate of over 60% with differences from one country to another according to [9]. For Romania the collection rate is over 35%, with a significant increase in 2024, along with the implementation of circular economy SGR project. The success of this SGR system depends on several factors, ranging from information and education to a balanced collaboration between all those involved: from local authorities, regional governments both from the private and public milieu.

In this respect, it becomes suggestive to apply a case study using a direct qualitative research based on a questionnaire. It was applied to a representative sample of 80 people obtained by multiplying the levels related to the identification questions of the surveyed respondents as follows: 2 gender levels, 4 age group levels, 5 school education levels and 2 levels related to the residence place. The questionnaire was administered between June 10<sup>th</sup> and July 10<sup>th</sup> 2024, with a margin of error of +/-5%. A random sampling method was applied, so that 58 respondents answered the online questionnaire through the Google Forms platform, and 22 respondents were questioned at the PET collection points located in stores or in their vicinity both in Reșita and in other rural and urban localities of Caraș-Severin county.

The questionnaire applied to the respondents included 16 open questions with several answer options, and four of them were identification questions. Thus, the structure of the sample of 80 respondents included:

- 53.4% male and 46.6% female;
- the age groups 20-40 and 40-60 each represented 29.3% of the total respondents, being followed by the age group under 20, with a percentage of 24.1%, and the

lowest percentage (17, 2%) was represented by people over 60.

- as for the level of education, the respondents with higher and post-graduate studies predominated, totaling 51.7%, followed by the high school graduates (20.7%) and middle school graduates (17.2%)

- according to the area of residence, respondents from the urban environment predominated with 67.2%, and 32.8% came from the rural environment.

Through the direct qualitative research applied to the sample of 80 people, the aim was to achieve the following:

**The purpose of the research:** Measuring the level of use of the Guarantee-Return System in Caraş-Severin county  
**Main objective :** Identifying the level of knowledge and acceptance of the SGR by consumers in Caraş-Severin county

**Secondary objectives:**

1. level of information of consumers in Caraş-Severin county regarding SGR
2. level of knowledge of consumers in Caraş-Severin county regarding SGR
3. identifying the ways of using the SGRs in Caraş-Severin county
4. identifying the traders who use the SGRs in Caraş-Severin county
5. evaluation of consumer requests regarding the use of SGRs in Caraş-Severin county
6. estimation of the effects of the use of SGRs in Caraş-Severin county
7. the impact of the use of SGRs in Caraş-Severin county on the environment
8. evaluation of the degree of coverage (number of collection points) of the SGRs in Caraş-Severin county
9. management efficiency
10. innovative level of application of SGRs in Caraş-Severin county

**The hypothesis proposed** to be tested through the qualitative research was: *consumers in Caraş-Severin county appreciate the application of the SGR project as innovative for them and for society .*

#### 4. Research Results

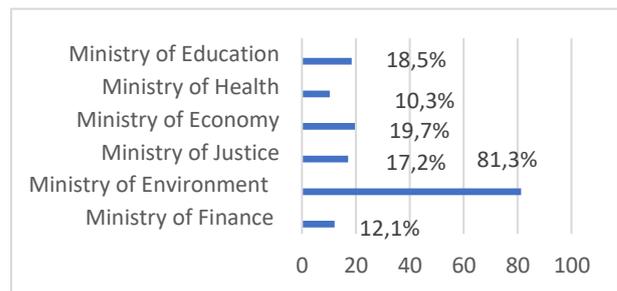
In order to achieve the objectives stated above, each of the questions in the questionnaire was aimed at determining the perception of the respondents in relation to them.

Thus, the results obtained from the application of the questionnaire on the qualitative research sample of 80 people led to the following conclusions:

1. Consumers in Caraş-Severin county benefited too from the general information when the RETURO company, which administers the SGR guarantee-return system, launched a broad campaign in this regard as early as October 2023. Through this communication campaign, not only the introduction of SGRs into use was announced, but consumers were also told how important

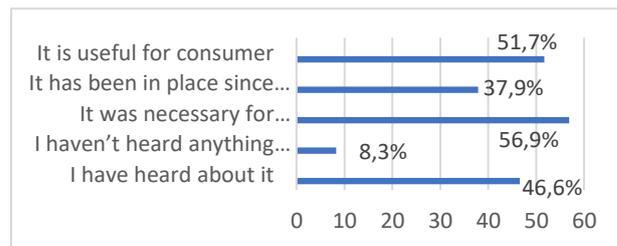
it is for the whole society to ensure a clean and green environment. Thus, the respondents participating in the qualitative research stated they were informed and knew about this circular economy project also applied in Caraş-Severin county, and the data in the graphs below are conclusive:

- The public entity that manages this project was correctly indicated by the respondents participating in the qualitative research according to the graph, over 81.3% of the respondents correctly indicated that the Ministry of Environment, Water and Forests is the public institution that implements the SGRs.



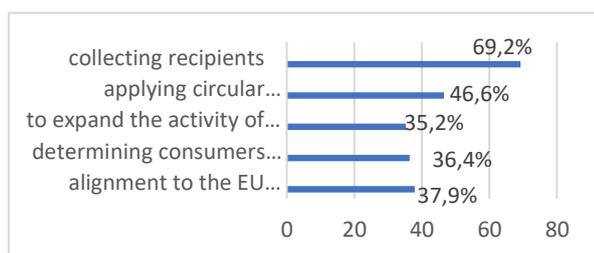
**Fig. 2.** The public entity that manages SGR project

- The extent to which the respondents participating in the qualitative research acquired knowledge (documented themselves) about the SGR project emerges from the data obtained which shows that: for 56.9% of the respondents this project was necessary for society and 51.7% of them declare that it is useful to them, while more than 37.9% of them declare that they have used it since its debut, i.e. since November 30<sup>th</sup> 2023 and only a small share of respondents under 8.3% declared that they had heard nothing about it.

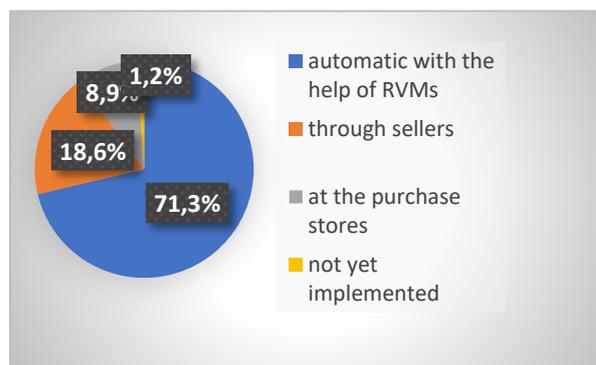


**Fig. 3.** The usefulness of the SGR project

- The main objective of this SGR project was identified by the respondents participating in the research as follows: most respondents, over 69.2%, indicated the real objective of the project to collect packaging, PET and bottles; and 46.6% of them believe that this project aims to apply circular economy; also more than 37% of the respondents declared that the project's objective is the alignment with the EU policy, the expansion of the traders' activities, or a way to induce consumers to buy more.



**Fig. 4.** The main objective of the SGR project



**Fig. 6.** The method of implementation of the SGR project

2. The management and implementation of the SGR project is ensured by the private sector through the RETURO company, and the Ministry of Environment, Water and Forests has the role of organization and coordination because this innovative project does not only aim at the collection of packaging but its expansion in the future through a European funding of 220 million euros, as shown by the relevant ministry that mentions new projects along these lines for the creation of recycling factories or companies to develop recycling capacities. The respondents participating in the qualitative research make the following assessments regarding the implementation of the SGR project in Caraş-Severin county:

- It is considered by more than 47.3% of respondents to be innovative, and 29.7% appreciate that SGR in Caraş-Severin county is well organized and implemented, being new and useful for 21.8% of them. Only 1.2% of respondents consider this project difficult and ambiguous.



**Fig. 5.** Assessments regarding the implementation of the SGR project

- The method of implementation of the SGR project in Caraş-Severin county was evaluated by the respondents as follows: over 71.3% of the respondents declare that the method of application of the SGR project in Caraş-Severin county is done automatically through the existing RVM devices in shops or in their proximity; 18.6% of them declare that the method of implementing the project is done manually through the sellers from the stores where they purchase their products; only 1.2% of the respondents declare that the SGR project has not yet been implemented in the county.

3. In half a year since the start of the SGR project in Romania, the efficiency is appreciated by the authorities as high, some data are eloquent in this regard according to Mr. Mihai-Cristian Ioniță, over 1.3 billion packages were returned by consumers and over 950 million packages entered the recycling facilities, and the packaging collection rate here reached over 62%. [19]. The efficiency and effects of the SGR project were also evaluated by the respondents from Caraş-Severin county who participated in the qualitative research and from the data analysis the following can be formulated:



**Fig. 7.** The effects of the SGR project

For 36.2% of respondents, this SGR project represents a very good way of civic education and environmental protection; 39.7% of the respondents appreciate that the packaging recovery locations are positioned at a great distance from their home or the place where they do their shopping; 34.8% believe that the return machines exist in too many locations, and 22.4% of them believe that they are insufficient. 34.5% of the respondents declare that by recovering the packaging they obtain savings or additional income, and 14.5% of them declare that their packaging was rejected for various reasons, only 2.1% of the respondents declare they cannot

make any assessment regarding the efficiency of the SGRs in the county.

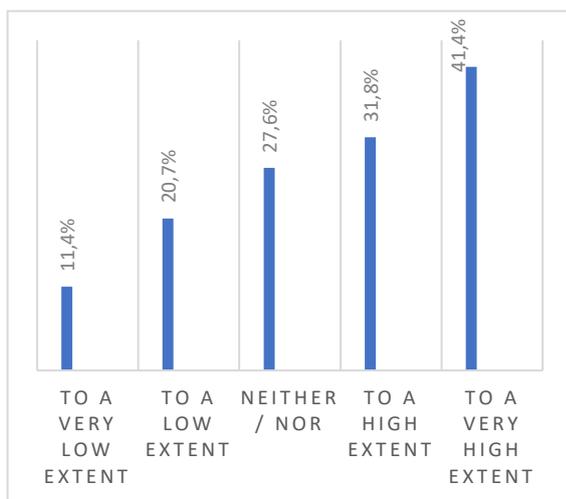
- An effect appreciated by consumers after returning the packaging is the voucher received, which is used by the respondents participating in the qualitative research as follows:



**Fig. 8.** The utility of the received voucher

More than 75.2% of the respondents declare that they use the voucher received after returning the packaging to pay for the purchases they make in the store; 16.7% of them consider it as an additional income they save or keep in order to make future purchases; 11.6% do not use it considering that it has a very low value and only 3.5% of the respondents declare they have not returned packaging and have not benefitted from the voucher.

- The extent to which the SGR project is efficient for society and the respondents participating in the qualitative research results from the data plotted below:

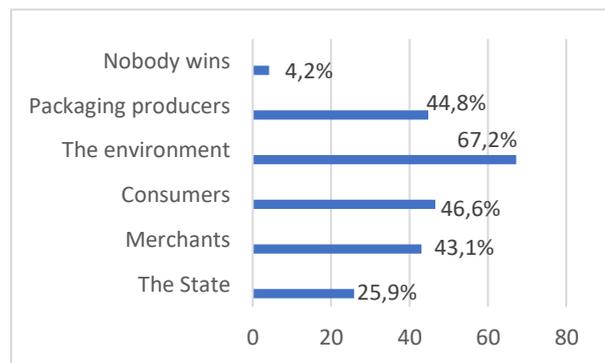


**Fig. 9.** The efficiency of the SGR project

More than 41.4% of the respondents appreciate the project as very effective to a high extent, to which are added the 31.8% of them who appreciate it to a high extent, so most respondents consider the SGR project in Caraş-Severin county as effective. Approximately 11.4% of respondents declare the project to be very little effective.

4. The expected results and the impact generated by the implementation of the SGR project for consumers and society can be numerous, but it should be noted that currently investing in a clean and green future should be a priority for each of us, according to [20]. Packaging no longer has to be a burden for present society, the environment should become a priority and opportunity to carry out actions as beneficial as possible for it. We must all participate in these major changes and use every returned packaging and recovered warranty innovatively to protect the environment in which we live. Some of the respondents participating in the qualitative research also subscribe to these principles, and some data results prove it.

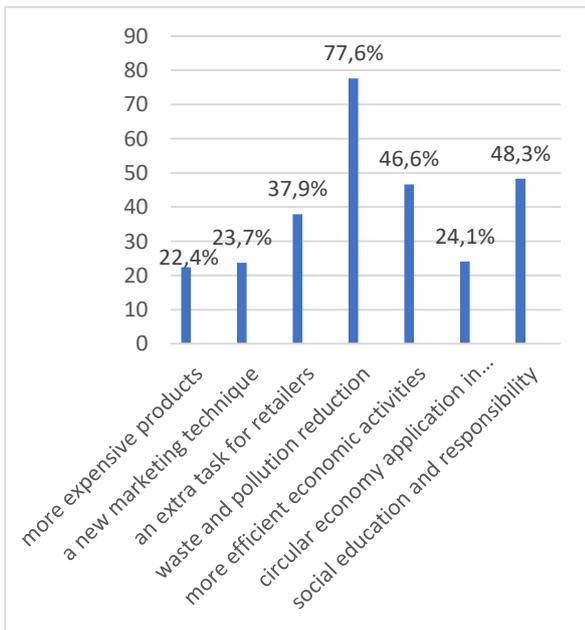
❖ The question “Who is the main winner from the implementation of the SGR project?”, was answered by respondents as follows:



**Fig. 10.** The main winner from the implementation of the SGR project

More than 67.2% of the respondents indicated that the environment is the main winner from the implementation of the SGR project in Caraş-Severin County, while only 4.2% of the respondents stated that they could not identify any winner of this project.

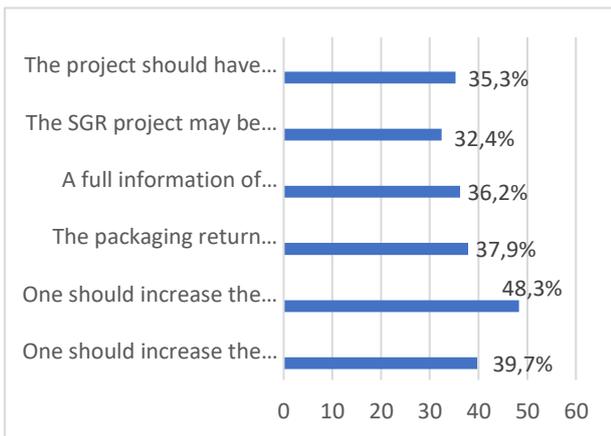
- How the SGR project is perceived and what impact it has had on the respondents participating in the qualitative research results from the graph below as follows:



**Fig. 11.** The impact of the implementation SGR project

For 77.6% of the respondents, the reduction of waste and pollution is the main impact and effect created by the implementation of the SGR project in Caraş-Severin county, and for the least, 22.4% of them, the implemented SGR project triggered higher prices for the purchased products.

- ❖ The recommendation that the respondents participating in the qualitative research would make to those implementing the SGR project in Caraş-Severin County would be:



**Fig. 12.** The recommendations regarding the implementation of the SGR project

More than 48.3% of respondents would recommend increasing the number of packaging collection points, and 37.9% of them would like the return of packaging to be automatic. Obviously, over 32.4% of

the respondents from Caraş-Severin County believe that this SGR project can be improved and perfected.

From the analysis and presentation of the data obtained from the qualitative research, the tested hypothesis is accepted: *consumers from Caraş-Severin county appreciate the application of the SGR project as innovative for them and for society.*

### 5. Conclusions

All in all, innovative management in circular economy plays an essential role in promoting sustainable and efficient resource management practices. The implementation of the SGR project represents a relevant example of the application of a circular resource management system, which demonstrates the benefits of an integrated and innovative approach in promoting sustainability. Through the collaboration and involvement of all stakeholders, the SGR project demonstrates that a circular economy is possible and can bring significant benefits to both the environment and society.

The ReturRo project implemented by our country so far is considered a success by the initiators and various specialists. It ensures the return of materials to the market in the most transparent way and an efficient collection through recycling locations.

According to the data provided by Piaţa (The Market) Journal on 16.09.2024 [7], in the eight months of project implementation, over 3.5 billion SGR packages have been put into circulation by manufacturers, and of these over 1.3 billion packaging items have already been used by consumers, resulting in over 75,000 tons of materials, which represents over 83% of the amount of packaging collected. The project reports show that the set goal of 65% recovery rate can be met by 2025, registering a positive trend for the structure and organization of collection services, i.e. more than 39.61% of the packaging was recovered for plastic, 36.47 % for metal and 35.38% for glass [7].

The project is not valuable only in terms of the numbers achieved, it managed to form a civic, responsible behavior of consumers, proving to them that they can be efficient and actively involved, including financially, in circular economy and environmental protection. The project managers also announced that the sixth regional center for counting and sorting packaging for the southern part of the country was opened in the commune of Almaj in Dolj county.

Information sessions in the form of webinars were organized by the managers of the SGRbyRetuRo project for all economic operators involved in this project.

Thus, retailers sell the products with a guarantee to consumers, they pay 50 bani for it, only for the packages that have the specific symbol of package with guarantee. Then the consumers return these packages and only the empty, unflattened packages with the label intact will be accepted at the spot. Thus the collected packaging is

recycled and re-transformed into new packaging that will be put on the market with other new products.

Every trader has an effective involvement if he announces and informs in any way the consumers in the store about the manual or automatic possibility of recycling the packaging available to them. The return ticket can be used by consumers inside the store, being deducted from the total purchases they make. The SGR is implemented in two directions: one of applying a tax on each product with packaging sold and the second direction of returning the guarantee to the consumer when he returns the packaging. By implementing these very precise processes that manage the packaging throughout the commercial chain, circular economy is realized in practice, which responds exactly to an innovative management, accepted more and more by the consumers of Caraş-Severin county.

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